

'Loitering' in Urban Public Space – Wandering with a Street Poet in Berlin

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Based on a single case study, the text collage discusses the phenomenon of 'loitering' in urban public space in two parallel discourses. The author accompanied a poet and street vendor on his daily walks on the streets of Berlin over a two-week period. The text collage combines narration of *in situ* observations with analytical reflections.

The 45-year-old poet (name and address withheld) has been selling his poems for 19 years in the streets of Berlin to complement his welfare payments. Every day, he takes identical routes across the city. Based on this single case, the essay discusses the poet's daily 'loitering' in public spaces as a strategy of living and surviving. In the text collage, a free-floating story runs in parallel with analytical reflections.

The story I narrate is grounded in my observations as well as the visual, textual and auditive material I collected during the field research.

Over a period of two weeks, I accompanied the poet and street vendor on his paths across Berlin, recording our conversations as well as his conversations with passers-by.

In addition, I documented the joint journeys with various other media (maps, texts, videos). With and through the narration, I explore the poet's urban experiences (travels, looking out for potential buyers, specific interaction and communicative practices) and his imaginations (ideas, wishes and dreams), which structure his daily practices in the public places of Berlin.

In the analysis, I draw on Goffman's concepts of "front stage", "performance" (Goffman 1959) and "interaction" (Goffman 1963/1966) together with de Certeau's (1984/1988) concept of "tactic". My argument is that the poet's daily 'loitering' is tactical in character and takes place temporarily yet routinely in specific public locations in Berlin. Through his performances (such as moving, walking, standing and interacting with potential clients) he produces ephemeral and improvised selling-spaces and publics within given spatial, temporal and physical conditions of specific urban locations. In doing so, he not only complements his welfare payments but also creates specific affiliations with and orientations towards the city.

Keywords:

**Ethnographic-Artistic Research,
Performance, Public Space,
Street Vending, Tactic**

Prologue

I was wandering around randomly, for hours and hours, for miles and miles, in the district of Kreuzberg-Neukölln in Berlin searching for my research project people in public locations, whose behaviour and actions could be understood as a form of 'loitering'. The same questions were flashing through my mind again and again: What does 'loitering' mean in the first place? How are practices of 'loitering' identifiable? Are they observable for me as a researcher? These questions circling in my head, I started to waver in my intentions.

Suddenly, I was startled out of my thoughts. A tall man appeared in front of me, sun-tanned, haggard, unkempt blond hair, wearing a worn light blue jacket and wide mossy-green trousers. He seemed to be in his forties. He held a bundle of A8 paper sheets in his right hand and started reciting a poem, with keen facial expressions and inviting gestures:

We are standing in the noise of street.

We let go and say:

I lie next!!!

To the trials,

For eternal life

And beyond!!

Between

My hands

And my legs!!,

Of my day!

without being.

Ich liege neben!!!

den Versuchen,

überlebenslang-

hinaus!!!

Zwischen

den Händen!!!

und Beinen!!,

meines Tages!,

ohne Sein.

He handed me a copy of his handwritten poem. At the bottom of the poem, there were two pointers in brackets: „read aloud“/„folk poetry“, an address and a phone number. Now, it started to dawn on me: He was a poet intending to sell me a copy of his poem, for 50 cents. I gave him 4 euros and queried where he was heading. "I'm on my way to Kastanienallee", he answered. "Could I accompany you?", I asked. He accepted, and this was how we began our long joint walks over a period of two weeks in the streets of Berlin.¹

In what follows, I will employ as material my *in situ* observations as well as recordings of our conversations and the poet's conversations with passers-by to approach the phenomenon of 'loitering' in urban public space from a dual perspective. The text is structured as a collage, composed of two discourses from situations that took place during our walks. One discourse consists of a narrative that includes fragmented and condensed micro-stories as well as quotes. With and through this narration, I explore the poet's urban experiences and his imaginations (ideas, wishes and dreams), which structure his daily selling and 'missionary' practices in public spaces. The other discourse is an analysis that aims to explore and explain his urban practices by making use of different theoretical concepts. On their parallel tracks, the two types of texts offer a loose and associative juxtaposition of equal, not hierarchically organized elements, which also stand independently of each other. The narration folds out on the left part of each page, the analysis proceeding on the right part of each page.

1 I accompanied the poet for two weeks in April 2017 on his paths across Berlin. I recorded our conversations and his conversations with passers-by. Furthermore, I documented my observations with various media (videos, maps, texts). To examine how the process of documentation and the tools used in it affected the situations would deserve a separate treatment.

He has always been on the road. Every day since 1998, he has been successfully trying to sell his 240 poems in the streets. He makes around 60 euros per day. He makes his living by two thirds from his sales, and by one third from the welfare payment. Three times a day he has been taking the same route, for 19 years. For 8 years, he's been addicted to heroin.

A poem that refreshes your mind, your daily life!

He has always been starting right at his front door, Lichtenrader Strasse 77 / Berlin, opposite Tempelhofer Flugfeld, district of Neukölln. On his way to the metro station he looks to the right and to the left. He is a keen observer. At Leinestrasse, he takes the subway #8 up to Rosenthaler Platz, district Mitte. He's always cautious in the underground because he's a fare dodger. Schönleinstrasse, Kottbusertor, Moritzplatz, Heinrich-Heine-Strasse, Jannowitzbrücke, Alexanderplatz, Weinmeisterstrasse, passengers are getting on and off at these stations, sitting and standing, on seats, in aisles and in spaces in-between, often close to each other. He recites his poems, fervently, with a vivid facial expression and elaborate gestures. Sometimes, he even closes his eyes. Several times, he works his way through the train – every new passenger could be a potential customer.

**A poem to brighten up your everyday life.
A protection from the noise, an 'interpretation
of taste' which makes every moment enjoyable.
An instrument for your whole life.
A poem that refreshes your daily life!
Whenever you read it aloud, it will entertain
your mind!**

Kastanienallee, an avenue of 950 metres, starts at the junction of Fehrbelliner Strasse and Weinbergsweg and leads to the Schönhauser corner. Here, in the district of Prenzlauer Berg, he smells the money and the bustle: There are cutely renovated façades, luxury apartments, galleries, bars, designer shops on either side of the avenue. The district has changed enormously within the last 19 years, it has become a trendy and hip location for tourists and newcomers to Berlin. He knows it by heart, he's seen it in the oppressive summer heat, in autumn when the leaves are falling from the chestnut trees, in the harsh spring light, as well as in ice and snow. He frequents the café "An einem Sonntag im August", Kastanienallee 103, because he and the owner know each other.

The 45-year-old poet (name and address withheld) has been selling his poems for 19 years in the streets of Berlin. Every day, he takes the same routes across the city. As a mobile street vendor (cf. Bhowmik 2010, xv), he does not have a permanent location. He moves permanently – with little effort – carrying copies of his 240 poems in his hands. By selling his poems, he intends to initiate the passers-by's processes of self-reflection by stimulating their senses. In doing so, he tries to raise their awareness for the 'right' life amidst the wrong. Thereby, he consciously plays the role of a redeemer and educator, adept and leader – always in a 'missionary' tone. From his perspective, his daily mobility across Berlin guarantees an additional income to his welfare payments and finances his heroin consumption. In the following analytical text, I will firstly explore the poet's mobile urban practice as a form of 'loitering'. Secondly, I will examine how his daily selling and 'missionary' practice serves as a strategy for living and surviving in the city.

What does 'loitering' mean? As any notion, there are different meanings. In our everyday language 'loitering' or 'loitering around' (*Herumlungern* in German) has a negative, even offensive connotation and is a synonym for leading a dissolute lifestyle and hanging around (openthesaurus, 2017). This definition of 'loitering' is based on everyday observations and discursive attributions.

Kruse's and Graumann's (1978) work discusses social and cultural perceptions and evaluations of types of 'loitering' in public spaces. They take into account that a city consists of diverse public spaces, which are regulated by different political and administrative measures and orders. As Kruse and Graumann point out, "[i]n relation to purposes, situations and social contexts a specific 'way of walking' has a specific social valence of being socially accepted or not accepted, desired or undesired" (ibid., 194, my translation).

The authors clarify this thesis through the example of the strongly commercialized and 'Calvinistic' everyday life of Eastern and Northern American cities

**Would you like to have an enjoyable poem
for your whole life for 50 cents upwards?
You can also pay 500 euros for it,
no problem.**

He is walking with his head and shoulders bent forward, he is shivering. It's seven o'clock in the morning, all the cafés and shops in the avenue are still closed. No noises. No wind. Only a few pedestrians with defined purposes are on their way. He sits down on a wooden bench, takes a piece of aluminium foil out of his jacket's inside pocket, opens the heroin-ball skilfully and places the powder on the aluminium foil's surface. He heats it up with a lighter and inhales the vapor deeply. He repeats this procedure five times, ritually. Occasionally, he takes a break, his face relaxes.

**A poem which nourishes your 'theme'!
A poem that refreshes your daily life!
A protection from the noise, an 'interpretation
of taste', which makes every moment complete.
A poem that refreshes your mind,
your daily life!**

When the train is pulling into the station Rosenthaler Platz, his trousers and his hair are lifted by the warm wind. People stream onto the platform. It's the usual morning rush hour. He carves his way through the crowd, praising his goods eloquently and vehemently. Nobody listens. Nobody responds. A young Arabic man, dark eyes, green cowboy hat on his head, is standing to the right at the foot of the stairs to Weinbergsweg and is selling the street magazine "Strassenfeger". Their paths intersect, as they often do here. The young man shouts at him: "You are ruined!" He boils with rage.

**A poem which enriches your daily life!
Spoken aloud, at least whispered.
It manages to characterize every moment.
It's very substantial. Would you like to have
this enjoyable poem for 50 cents upwards?
You can also pay 500 euros for it,
no problem.**

in the 1970s (ibid., 194) by noting that people who move slowly and aimlessly in specific locations are perceived as potentially unpredictable and incalculable – if they have a corresponding appearance. Their 'way of walking' challenges social expectations of how a successful, efficient and productive jobholder (and a citizen) in urban service societies performs in public spaces (ibid., 195).

My argument here is that the street poet's 'way of walking' in specific locations on this route is equally unpredictable and undirected as its direction and speed are shaped by the temporary pedestrian (in some cases even tram and car) traffic: He moves, waits, stands and interacts in accordance to the hustle and bustle on the streets. Due to the fact that public spaces such as in the Kastanienallee, a district of Prenzlauer Berg, are affected by growing commodification, touristification and (semi-)privatization, I argue that the visibility of the poet's selling and 'missionary' activities are interpreted by some fellow urbanites as a disturbance of public order. They do not match the image of a neat, clean and secure city. Moreover, street vending is generally considered to be a 'marginalized' practice in public spaces (Austin, 1994; Ha, 2009, 2016; Spalter-Roth, 1988; Stroux, 2006).

In the context of this article, I define the poet's daily urban selling and 'missionary' practice as a partly visible form of 'loitering' – as moving, standing, performing, interacting with potential clients – that takes place temporarily yet routinely in specific public urban locations in Berlin.

For the present purposes, Goffman's (1959) theatrical metaphor of the "front stage" is helpful to describe in more detail his daily selling and 'missionary' practice. Goffman points out that "front stage" behavior – public spaces in cities are, in my view, prime examples of "front stages" – is what people do when they know that others are aware of them. People adjust their performance in accordance to the way in which they (want to) interact with an audience. A high density of people in public locations increases the dramaturgical and theatrical quality of urban performances. As Goffman aptly

A poem which enriches your daily life and transforms your awareness. A protection from the noise, a wonderful piece which comes alive when you read it aloud.

There's radioactive rain in Chernobyl, it might reach Berlin today or tomorrow, he says. There is competition and slaughter in Syria – without the least prospect of peace. He sells his poems so that things will improve one day.

English? French? German? A poem which transforms a moment in a meaningful reading. It refreshes your mind and allows you to control yourself. Would you like to buy a poem for 50 cents upwards?

A young lady is standing in the door frame of a music club, on the opposite side of the avenue. She is dressed in a blue dress, high heels, long blond hair, a cigarette between her red lips. He carefully looks to the right and to the left before he hastily crosses the street in her direction. As soon as she spots him, she disappears in the dark of the doorway.

Thank you for your attention! Let things go and enjoy the moment with all your senses. After having read my poem 20 times aloud, you will start writing your own diary. And then, a personal transformation process will begin.

A poem that enriches your everyday life. A protection from the noise, an 'interpretation of taste' which makes every moment enjoyable. An instrument for your everyday life.

For him, making money and idleness go hand in hand. He is experienced and trained and he even works on Sundays. He changes the side of the street, again and again. He entertains others and himself, again and again. And he observes what is going on in the streets.

A poem which enriches your daily life! Spoken aloud, at least whispered. It manages to characterize every moment. It's very substantial, it lasts for your whole life.

formulates: "A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman 1959, 15).

With and through the poet's active performance, his subject emerges. Again in the words of Goffman (1959) "A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be realized." (75) The poet has to perform his role explicitly to actualize and maintain his social role. Basically, his performance is a poetry reading (and selling) in front of and for passers-by. His performance is enacted "in a mode of routine and self-evidence". (Schmidt 2012, 10, my translation). It is strongly interwoven with the self-conception as a poet. In order to fulfill his double role as an entrepreneurial individual and poet, he makes use of various components of human communication – eye contact, language, gestures, facial expressions. He tries to draw attention to himself and his poems through an elaborated language, shouts and stand-up comedian elements (such as exaggerated gestures and facial expressions together with a solemn speech). His performance oscillates between masterhood, servanthood and economic efficiency. From the perspective of the poet, his urban practice is characterized by a high level of intention and targeting. In other words, he is challenged to perceive and make use of mostly unpredictable and unforeseeable events in the streets – as for example tourist groups, rush hours – to achieve his economic and 'missionary' aims.

De Certeau's (1984/1988) actor-orientated concept of action allows us to understand the poet's daily urban practices as spatial and temporal tactics which deal with unpredictable events. In *The practice of everyday life* de Certeau (1984/1988) deals with practices of resistance of ordinary people. He is particularly interested in "systems of operational combination" (ibid., xi),

The green lawn area of the park is glowing in the full midday sun. Two young mothers are enjoying a picnic on a yellow and black checked blanket, one with blond and short hair in a pink dress, the other with a ponytail in a navy blue overall, both carrying babies in their arms. He heads to them, slightly stooping to draw their attention. They look up, surprised. He squats down and starts reciting his poem. He accentuates his spoken word with small and big, slow and fast gestures, which merge playfully and smoothly into each other. His gaze is straight, his words are well-chosen and distinguished. They buy one copy from him, they give him one euro 50 cents.

I wrote this poem, it was a random discovery during my autobiographical studies. I have more than 240 poems at home, but I would like to give you this poem. Whenever you let go and read it aloud, your mind gets refreshed. Could you buy a copy for 50 cents upwards? I make my living by selling them.

He secretly knows that he is an urban adept and needs a crowd of people around him. He would suffer in a provincial setting. If only people were aware of his gift, he might have a better life and help his audience in getting one themselves.

**Would you like to listen to my poem?
If you read it aloud, your awareness of the moment increases. The poem's meaning completely depends on how you read it.
A poem that refreshes your daily life! Whenever you read it aloud, it will entertain your mind!
English? Italian? German? A poem which transforms a moment in a meaningful reading.
It refreshes your mind and allows you to control yourself. Would you like to buy a poem for 50 cents upwards?**

A young man in a grey jumper, combed black hair, headphones around his neck, is sitting at a high table in an Italian restaurant on the footpath. He's bending over a dish of salad with tomatoes and lentils. He approaches him by giving a lecture about scrunching crispy salad leaves between the teeth. He's on high alert. He speaks with closed eyes, precise and virtuous hand movements. He has a straight posture. He has an intent look. The young man is amused, grabs into his wallet and pays 2 euros for one of his poems.

which are produced through a creative use of the given world of things. De Certeau describes these daily practices as micro-political tactics, which render problematic and challenge the strategies of social and cultural ideas and measures of public order. Tactics are daily life practices which use time and timing to appropriate the place of another. As de Certeau states: "Because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'. Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'." (Ibid., xix) De Certeau gives an example to illustrate this procedure: the practice of walking. He describes walking as a concrete bodily tactic to circumvent a given spatial order and to produce a space with new meanings. Thus, tactics can be described as creative and productive acts which are based on "heterogeneity, contingency and unpredictability" (Winter 2001, 198, my translation). Tactics are the actualisation of a potential.

Evidently, de Certeau's concept of "tactic" can be used to analyse the poet's urban selling and 'missionary' practices. By walking, moving, standing and observing, he 'reads' the temporal, spatial and physical conditions of public locations on his route across Berlin as they shape his presentation and his interactive possibilities with potential audiences. He consciously passes through locations which have, at least temporarily, a high density of passers-by in a confined space – at various moments during the same day and / or week. As Rogerson and Beavon notice in their study of street traders in Johannesburg, "[t]he ideal hawker location is one which has a high pedestrian and constant stream of potential customers" (Rogerson & Beavon 1985, 235).

By observing the appearance and behaviour of passers-by, the poet looks for clues, which would indicate a potential consumer's interest. Under 'favourable' conditions, he transforms specific locations – cafés, footpaths, the metro station Rosenthaler Platz, street corners, etc. – simultaneously into part-time publics and selling spaces, through an

**A poem that refreshes your everyday life.
A protection from the noise, an 'interpretation
of taste' which makes every moment enjoyable.
An instrument for your whole life.**

He knows that ticket inspectors can catch him in the subway when he is not cautious enough, because he is deeply involved in a conversation with clients. The new subway trains are a horror to him, because one can fully walk through all the wagons. A group of four ticket collectors manages to examine one full train between two stations. They catch every fare dodger in the act. Six times a day, he has to survive the nerve-wracking seventeen-minute journey in the subway line #8. He has never bought a ticket.

**Would you like to buy a poem?
It's a refreshing original, which helps you
to control senseless disasters.
It's a poem against the end of the word!**

An overfilled dumpster bars his way, he slows down his footsteps. The snack bar "Burger World", Kastanienallee 100, is being converted into a posh restaurant. Wall plaster, wash basins, carpet scraps, radiators are also towering up around the dumpster. The front window of the salesroom is sealed with a transparent plastic, the door is wide open. Suddenly, a drilling noise sounds through the opening, he jerks.

**Would you like to have an entertaining poem
for your whole life? It has a wonderful effect
on your ability to control all kind of disasters.
And you can experience an entraining trans-
formation process. It really depends on each
one of us. If you have no money, I have a gift
for you.**

He gets off the subway line #8 at the station Moritzplatz. He looks around the platform with a sceptical gaze, slightly nervous. A young North African approaches him. He is dressed in tight black jeans and a leather jacket, his cap is pulled down to cover up his face. They nod to each other, walk a few metres, side by side, as closely as possible. He pockets one heroin-ball, price: 20 euros.

active performance. With regard to the former, and drawing on Goffman (1963/1966), a public evolves in reciprocal interactions between human beings. In this case, the poet strategically constructs publics based on mutual attention, involvement and coordinating his actions with passers-by. As for the latter, Evan's point is useful when he states that "[t]he sale is a product of the particular dyadic interaction of a given salesman and prospect rather than a result of individual qualities of either alone" (Evans 1963, 76). Moreover, through and with communicative practices, such as instruction and warning, the poet intends to affect the passers-by's senses and initiates/offers processes of self-reflection to them by sensitizing them for the 'right' life in a wrong world. Thereby, he confronts them with heterogeneity, unpredictability and 'otherness' beyond the officially accepted street culture in European cities.

In conclusion: The poet's simultaneous provoking of publics and his production of selling-spaces occur on a short-term and semi- or unplanned scale, since interactions with potential clients often happen situationally and contingently. At the same time, these interactions are not accidental, because he hopes to gain an advantage by intentionally making a contact with a potential buyer. The poet's daily 'loitering' in public spaces can be described as an ephemeral and improvised selling and 'missionary' practice. He creatively uses given spatial, temporal and physical conditions of specific locations to produce temporary, flexible and heterogeneous selling-spaces and to raise publics in them – the emergence and dissolution of both not being predictable and calculable.

These ephemeral and partial publics and selling spaces, where interests and practices of heterogeneous users of public spaces collide, give an idea of how cultural differences can be locally and situationally made, re-made and challenged. The cultural differences emerge within the process of immediate corporeal presence and communication with co-present others. For both parties cultural differences as expressions of distance and proximity can be

English? French? German? A poem which transforms a moment in a meaningful reading. It refreshes your mind and allows you to control yourself. Would you like to buy a poem for 50 cents upwards?

He is waiting in the queue in front of an ice bar, designed in the retro style of the 1950s, Kastanienallee 10. The ice-vendor, well-built, bald, in a white overall and a little hat on his head, sells directly from the blue counter on the street. Today he has nine different flavors of ice cream in metal cubes which keep them cold: vanilla, chocolate, lemon, hazelnut, nougat, poppy-marzipan, peach, blackberry, strawberry, the scoop for one euro 30 cents. "Poppy-marzipan ice cream with a wafer, please", he orders. While the ice-vendor energetically scoops his ice cream, he puts some coins on the counter.

It's beautiful to entertain your senses through reciting my poem! Pay me as much as you can but it shouldn't hurt you. Can you read it? Make some copies for your husband and he can join you. You also find my address on the copy, so we can stay in touch.

He is a gaunt man. His jacket and his trousers are sometimes dirty, his blond hair and his beard wild. He knows he is likely to attract attention. The police checks him inside U8, subway station Boddinstrasse, one more time. "Are you carrying drugs with you?" He shakes his head and starts reciting a poem. His gab fails – he has two heroin-balls under his tongue.

Thank you for your attention! Would you like to buy a poem? After having read my poem 20 times aloud, you will start writing your autobiography.

A poem which refreshes your everyday life. The poem will last for your whole life. Whenever you read it, it will 'entertain your mind'.

He is following a business man, carrying a shiny black leather case, down the avenue. He catches up with him and starts talking to him. "Stop harassing me!", the business man snarls at him, looks straight ahead and pushes his chin forward, arrogantly. His heels are rattling on the pavement. "Asshole!"

(un)consciously perceived and experienced. Thus, in the words of Vaiou and Kalandides: "the border between familiar and strawwnge, inside and outside are re-negotiated and even challenged, while public space acquires new meanings" (Vaiou and Kalandides 2009, 18).

Societal and political polarizations and inequalities in European cities – as for example structural unemployment, worsening living and working conditions, shrinking social welfare payments and growing income gaps – have been increasing since the mid-1970s. Given these conditions, a Berliner poet's daily 'loitering' in urban public spaces exemplifies a strategy for living and surviving.

By moving through public spaces, he plays his double role as a street vendor and poet in front of passers-by. He appropriates concrete public spaces to boost his welfare payments and to produce affiliations with and orientation within the city. In doing so, he makes use of the indeterminate potential of selected public spaces for his personal economic needs and 'missionary' interests. Following here Henri Lefebvre (1968/1996), "the right to the city is "a demand...[for] a transformed and renewed access to urban life" (158). Urban citizens contribute to the 'city as an oeuvre' (ibid., 172-3) by inhabiting, occupying and transforming urban space. Against this background, streets and squares can maintain an eminent political function of their own as concrete spaces, where he makes his demands and aspirations visible to others by actively locating himself. In other words, his poetry should not only affect urban life, but accomplish itself in and through the living body, with and through a subjective reading performance. In this respect, the poet's mobile urban activities represent one productive practice to undermine dominant institutional orders of social involvement and creation.

A poem that refreshes your mind and your daily life. It's important that you read it aloud. You can crush every disaster between your teeth!

Would you like to buy a poem, which transforms every moment in a meaningful reading? It lasts forever!

At a corner of Kastanienallee and Schönhauser Allee, he sits down on a round stone wall leading around a linden tree, just a few foot-steps away from a tram station. The leaves of the linden are full-green, the sun is twinkling through the leaves, coasters and cigarette butts are scattered around on the ground. He delves into his right outside pocket of his jacket, takes out the coins and puts them on his left palm. He counts the money, fast and slickly. Cars are flashing by on the Eberswalder Strasse, sirens are howling. He's reached one third of his daily average income, 21 euros 30 cents.

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